

TV Review

'JFK Assassination'

By DAVID KIPEN

It's a good thing "Our World" was canceled, or Linda Ellerbee and Ray Gandalf would be probably be giving us their take on the JFK assassination, too. TV networks large and small have been picking at that 25-year-old scab all month, and Tuesday at 10:56 p.m. Arts & Entertainment got into the act.

"JFK Assassination: As It Happened" stands apart from all the other commemorations precisely because of how little reconstructive work went into it. It is simply NBC's coverage of the assassination's aftermath, picking up three minutes after the network went on the air (when somebody had the presence of mind to start taping it) and running continuously for nearly six hours. At 3:30 p.m. Edwin Newman will come on to append a summation of the events leading up to the funeral, and his recollections of covering it all. To judge by the first 40 minutes made available from A & E, it's going to be

a uniquely mesmerizing day of television.

CBS attempted something similar the other night when they had Dan Rather stitching together two prime-time hours out of that network's original four days of coverage. Rather was working for a CBS affiliate in Texas at the time, so the footage slotted quite nicely into CBS' ongoing campaign to position Rather as the reigning elder statesman of TV news. It was a good try, and it did have authoritative Walter Cronkite reminding us of how anchormen got to be called that, but A & E's unmonkeyed-with transmission still comes nearest to bringing back how the day must have truly felt.

After a gap of 25 years, you may still find yourself dreading the confirmation of the President's death, as the sober-suited team of Frank McGee, Chet Huntley and Bill Ryan so obviously were. The voyeur in us almost wants them to break down, to

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react as so much of the country was reacting, but they don't. They just sit by a black telephone and wait for the call from Dallas, repeating what little they know for sure like a rosary. It's very moving in its way, the more so by comparison to the soft-shoe that passes for TV news nowadays.

Very possibly, this is what "Our World" and its inferior clones could have used — less portentous interpretation across the years, and more screen time for the events as we perceived them at the time. Letterman and Carson commonly air reruns featuring guests who plug movies that have long since flopped. Why not do the same with news?

Nostalgia — even good, unmediated nostalgia like "As It Happened" — smacks of narcissism. It's fascinating once in a while, but too much of it makes for weeks like the one we had last month, when the simultaneous anniversaries of Kristallnacht and, more trivially, the "War of the Worlds" broadcast threatened to knock breaking news clear off the air. "As It Happened" is a well-done instance of an alarming trend — our continuing infatuation with our own past. Watch it, but watch the nightly news right after. Watched alone, it steers us one day closer to a calendar full of anniversaries, and empty of incident.